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SUBJECT: ISLAM IN NIGER (3): FAITH FOLLOWS THE DOLLAR IN
AGADEZ

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Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER ZACH HARKENRIDER FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) NOTE: This is the third in a series of cables (reftels A&B) reporting on the changing nature of Islam in Niger. END
NOTE During recent travel to Agadez, Poloff and AIDoff tried to square an interesting circle. Traditional authorities - the Sultan and Grand Mosque Imam - claimed that the Nigerian inspired Islamic fundamentalist movement Ihiyaus Sunnah wa Ikhmatul Bidi'ah (Izala for short) had been all but excluded from the city by their tenacious stewardship of Sufi tradition. This seemed born out in the street, where no veils, beards, or other visible Izalist markings were evident. Yet, upon closer inspection, emboffs encountered other perspectives, and discovered several well financed and conspicuous fundamentalist mosques. The search for an explanation illuminated the role of traditional authorities, "religious entrepreneurs," and foreign money in the low-intensity conflict between African syncretistic Islam and global Islamic fundamentalism running in the world's least developed country.

THE SULTANATE OF AGADEZ: BUTTRESS OF
SUFU TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL POWER

[1](#)2. (C) Elhadj Ibrahim Oumarou dit Sofo, the 126th Sultan of the Air (pro. aye-air), has reigned in Agadez since January of 1961. His dynasty traces its roots back to 1405. By virtue of this lineage, the Sultanate of Agadez remains a symbol of the north's independence and distinctiveness and a source of pride for a region that often feels cut off from the resources and culture of a demographically and politically dominant south. Like the lesser traditional village and nomadic "groupement" chiefs who owe him allegiance, the Sultan of the Air is both a temporal and spiritual leader for the people of northern Niger. The duality of his role is expressed in the mud-brick architecture of Agadez's old quarter, where the Sultan's Palace adjoins the city's landmark 16th century Grand Mosque, with its hundred-foot tall baked-mud minaret. The Sultan stressed his dual function during a December 11 meeting with emboffs, in which we were joined by the Imam of the Grand Mosque, the Grand Khadi Malam

Sidi. The two men stressed the importance of tradition and downplayed Izalist influence in Agadez.

¶3. (U) The Sultan and the Grand Khadi are the paramount religious and moral leaders of the Agadez Region. Like traditional chiefs and Grand Mosque Imams throughout Niger, they are recognized by the government and people as authorities in civil disputes, family law, and in matters of faith. They conceive of their role as the preservation of the Islamic traditions brought to the region by Sufi saints 700 years ago, and they defend those traditions through a veto authority over mosque construction and sermon content (reftel A). Their traditions are based on Sunni Islam and the Maliki school of jurisprudence practiced in Egypt. Both the Quadiriyya and Tidjaniya Sufi brotherhoods played a role in defining Agadez's brand of Islam in the 19th century. Indeed, Quadiriyya's great popularizer, the Fulani cleric and Sokoto Caliphate founder Ousmane Dan Fodio, studied in Agadez prior to launching his (1804-1808) "jihad" to purify the faith.

¶4. (C) However open Agadez's Islamic establishment may have been to Sufi innovation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the door seems to have swung closed long ago. There is little space in the Sultan or Khadi's worldview for a tradition as profoundly different and culturally disruptive as Izala. Both men minimized the role of Izala in Agadez, while stressing the disruptive aspect of its teachings on local culture. Bianou, Agadez's traditional 23 day carnival, is a clear throw-back to the animist past. The Sultan and Grand Khadi noted that Izalists would ban all such festivals, effectively "de-Africanizing" Agadez's very African style of Islam.

¶5. (C) Our interlocutors drew our attention to Izala's resource base, while denying its influence on them. They speculated that the movement received funds from abroad and

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noted that they had been approached by Izalist activists who wished to build mosques. Noting that "one does not speak of money with traditional rulers, because no matter how much you have, they have infinitely more," the Sultan and Khadi claimed that they had sent such emissaries packing. At the same time, they insisted that their traditional right to approve or disapprove of mosque construction and proselytizing remained effective. They cited various instances in which they had forced Izalists underground, and stressed that Agadezians had little use for the sect. They cited one 2005 instance in which a mob of young people burned down a straw Izala mosque.

¶6. (C) A subsequent meeting with another mainstream Sufi cleric, Malam Barmou of the Nigerien Association for Call and Islamic Solidarity (ANASI) suggested a slightly stronger and more public Izalist movement, though one limited by demography. For the last 30 years, Malam Barmou has run a sort of Islamic teachers' college out of his home in the city's old quarter. Offering advanced education in the Koran and Hadith to between 100 and 200 other Islamic teachers, the school is open to both men and women. Barmou also preaches on the religiously oriented private radio network R M. Barmou is a spiritual advisor to the Sultan and characterized their relationship as mutually respectful. Like the Sultan and Grand Khadi, he plays a role in policing sermon content. He noted that he screens guest preachers for conformity with ANASI's principles - namely, unity of religions and understanding between them, and the inculcation of Islamic faith through the demonstration of its virtues.

¶7. (C) Such moderation clashes with Izala's more confrontational approach. Barmou noted that Izalists had created "a militia of 150,000 people in Nigeria," and expressed his concern that some Nigeriens may have gone there to train too. He stressed the Hausa connection to Northern Nigeria's "Izala zone," noting that most of Agadez's Izalists were Hausas from Tessaoua (a town north of Katsina, Nigeria, and just west of the Nigerien city of Zinder). Few Tuaregs or

"real Agadezians" were involved with Izala. While he conceded that Izalists were building a big mosque with Saudi or Kuwaiti money, Barmou argued that few of those who pray in Izala mosques are true believers. Citing plausibly prosaic considerations, Barmou noted that people pray in Izala mosques because of their location in residential neighborhoods, especially during the hot months when it is hard for people to go all the way to the Grand Mosque.

A SECULAR PERSPECTIVE

¶8. (C) On December 12, emboffs met with local broadcast journalist and political activist Serge Hilpron. Half French, half Tuareg, western-educated and militantly secular, Hilpron started his private radio station, Radio Nomade, in the early 1990s, taking advantage of the new press freedoms available under Niger's democratizing government. A pro-democracy activist, Hilpron remains a critic of corruption in public life and the current Nigerien government. The Sultan's thesis on Izala in Agadez found its antithesis in Hilpron's argument, which suggested that better than half of Agadez's Muslims were Izalists. "As with termites," Hilpron argued, "though the penetration may be great, little is evident on the exterior until the building collapses."

¶9. (C) COMMENT: The choice of analogy said something about the way this modern, liberal, foreign-educated activist views the Izala. Passionately committed as he is to the modernization of his country and the maintenance of its secular democratic order, Hilpron likely exaggerates the extent of Izalist influence in his hometown. No one else in Agadez claimed that Izala enjoyed anything like the popular support that he suggested. Indeed, over the course of our visit, most interlocutors were to argue that Izalists comprise five-percent, maximum, of the city's population. However, while Serge Hilpron, a long-standing Embassy contact, might be guilty of alarmism he is not guilty of fabrication. Even while controlling for the secular intellectual's tendency to exaggerate reactionary influence, emboffs felt that his concerns suggested that the "penetration" might be much more extensive than the Sultan or Grand Khadi cared to admit. END COMMENT.

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RELIGIOUS FRAUD AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP:
IZALA THE AGADEZ WAY?

¶10. (C) Seeking to reconcile the views of Hilpron and the clerics, emboffs asked other Agadez contacts about the space open to Izalists and the popularity of the movement. One answer was particularly revealing. A Tuareg ex-rebel leader turned UNDP staffer noted that a cousin of his was the Imam of a large new Izala mosque. NOTE: Izalists have five mosques in Agadez out of a reported total of 100 END NOTE. The Imam, "Hamaya," had traveled to Saudi Arabia, but had come back inspired more by money than theology. His cousin jokingly noted that Hamaya "likes money," and was probably impressed by Izala's association with the wealth of Saudi Arabia and northern Nigeria. Speaking seriously, our interlocutor then noted that Hamaya had used 100 million CFA (\$198,000) in Saudi funds to build the new Izala mosque in Agadez - while pocketing 20% of the money for himself.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: While Agadez has a history as an Islamic center, it has an even longer and more distinguished history as a caravan town and smuggling center. Clean business ethics are not an Agadezian tradition, and, when foreign money is on offer, Agadezians see opportunity. The notion that Izalist construction is fueled by foreign money and local greed rather than religious belief has considerable currency on the Agadez "street." Coupled with the fact that one sees few

signs of Izala on those streets - none of the beards or clothing so noticeable in the cities of the south - it appears that foreign NGOs and preachers seeking to advance Wahabist interpretations of the faith may be getting taken for a ride by some shrewd local operators. Few Islamic NGOs in Niger have any monitoring and evaluation controls to speak of, and for every true believer, there are likely to be any number of "religious entrepreneurs."

¶12. (C) The Tuareg leader's anecdote was telling. No discussion of Izala got far without coming around to the issue of money. No one in Agadez argued that Izalists had a convincing or attractive theology to offer. All conceded that their resources and their image of wealth and connection to foreign sources of wealth made them attractive. Locals, we were told, went to Izalist mosques simply because they looked nice and new, or were convenient to their homes. Meanwhile, Izala's foreign finances seemed to be attracting "religious entrepreneurs" like Hamaya who embraced the movement for personal gain rather than spiritual renewal. Traditional rulers and Sufi Imams do limit the scope of Izalist activity in Agadez, even though they can no longer exclude it completely. But they may even accommodate it to satisfy the demands of those who stand to profit from Arab largesse. In a commercial town in a poor country, faith - or at least professions of it - follows the dollar. END COMMENT
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